

# CHRIPS

Centre for Human Rights and Policy Studies

## Impact of the National Youth Service Cohorts Programme in Kibera

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Brian Kimari

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# Acknowledgment

Wangui Kimari is a Senior Research Fellow at the Centre for Human Rights and Policy Studies. She is also a Research Fellow at the Institute for Humanities in Africa. Brian Kimari is a Junior Research Fellow at the Centre for Human Rights and Policy Studies. Copy editing was done by Joy Olwande and Lynda Ouma.

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## Contact Information

Centre for Human Rights and Policy Studies

P.O.Box 23748 – 00100, GPO Nairobi, Kenya

Tel: +254 20 527 0577

Email: [info@chrips.or.ke](mailto:info@chrips.or.ke)

Web: [www.chrips.or.ke](http://www.chrips.or.ke)

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# Introduction

In 2019, the Centre for Human Rights and Policy Studies embarked on a quantitative and qualitative research project to understand the impact of youth economic inclusion projects in Kenya, and, principally, the National Youth Service (NYS) Community Cohorts Programme (also known as the NYS Youth Empowerment Programme). Of key concern was the need to discern how this intervention impacted the economic life and governance opportunities available to youth and their potential to engage in violence or illicit work. The three objectives orienting this process were:

- 1) To assess the extent to which the programme in Kenya reached and provided opportunities for young men and women to participate in the economic and governance life of their communities.
- 2) To assess the extent to which the National Youth Service Community Cohorts Programme in Kenya actually reached those youth most likely to engage in violence or illicit work.
- 3) To evaluate the local community impact of the programme with respect to the inclusion of young women and men, and on reduced levels of physical violence and criminality.

Evidence collected over the course of two years, between 2019- 2021, and through both quantitative and qualitative methods, demonstrated the critical role that the National Youth Service and Community Cohorts Programme had in improving the economic life of young people and reducing incidences of crime and violence in the two poor urban areas where we conducted our inquiry: Kibera and Mathare.

This report details our findings in Kibera, which provide empirical evidence in support of inclusion programmes. These results also offer critical insights, primarily from the cohorts themselves, which can be leveraged towards enabling improvements in future interventions that target advancements in the economic life of young people, an expansion of their governance opportunities, and a reduction in crime and violence in the communities where they live.

The next section provides situational information that contextualizes the need for inclusion programmes in Kenya. This is followed by a presentation of our findings in Kibera, and policy recommendations emerging from these research results.

# Context

Youth are defined in the Kenyan constitution as: “the collectivity of all individuals in the Republic who have (a) attained the age of eighteen years but, (b) have not attained the age of thirty-five years” (GOK: 2010). With 75% of the country below the age of 35, Kenya is a very youthful country (Mzalendo 2019; Kimari et al 2020). This demographic status notwithstanding, 39% of those who qualify as youth are unemployed (Business Daily 2020). Perhaps as a consequence of this reality, youth unemployment is consistently linked to crime and other forms of insecurity. In this regard, a 2018 report by the National Crime Research Centre (NCRC) detailed how:

In recent years, youth issues have dominated the international agenda. On one hand, it is the youth who drive innovation, creativity, equality and justice in any society. They often participate in civic and political space through volunteerism, partaking in public participation forums, attending political rallies, taking part in community service and engaging in youth organizations. Some countries have even reserved membership for the youth in various public service dockets through which they shape and influence youth-related policy. Their contribution to the digital spaces – mass media, social media and print media, cannot also be overstated. On the other hand, however, they have been accused as the major perpetrators of crime and other acts of violence around the globe[...]. While extra caution must be taken against labelling youth as synonymous with crime, various analyses around the world have illustrated that among the various demographic categories, youth are the most vulnerable to indulgence in crime. (NCRC 2018: 6-7).

In addition, this report adds that, even against what is seen as “scanty” statistics, youth criminal activity in urban areas is seen to be on the rise, particularly in areas with large youth populations and located in poor urban settlements. However, building on findings from both the United Nations Office on Drug and Crime (UNODC) and the World Bank, the report goes on to assert that even while they may be “crucial triggers,” “poverty and unemployment are not, by themselves, causes of crime perpetrated by the young people” (NCRC 2018: 7).

Certainly, preoccupation with youth and gangs in urban areas tends to be hyper-narrativised and divorces their grievances from the wider dynamics of state prompted or sanctioned violence (Kunkeler and Peters 2011; Kimari et al 2020). Equally, while there is justified concern about youth involvement in violent formations such as gangs, there has been limited interrogation of the socio-economic and political conditions that generate them. As scholars such as Mutahi (2011) and Ruteere et al (2013) have argued, in Kenya, the deleterious characterization of youth associations tends to ignore the social and political settings that inform them, which include the deterioration of poor communities and the reality that it is principally those who live in informal (ised) urban settlements who suffer the most violence.

Informed by these perspectives, our study did not assume a direct causal link between youth unemployment and violence and crime. Rather, it is guided by the understanding that crime and violence are enabled by a number of cumulative drivers, including poverty

and unemployment, which overlap and are shaped by time and spatial dynamics, and can be exacerbated by the absence of basic services and social inclusion and protection mechanisms (cf Muggah 2012).

## Youth Interventions in Kenya

Despite the recent implementation of a rigorous policy framework targeting this demographic, and the initiation of various development initiatives responding to the socio-economic conditions of Kenyan youth, there remain many challenges to guaranteeing that youth benefit from these interventions. In this regard, a Youth Agenda (2018) report states that:

The government has been implementing various youth employment programmes such as the Youth Enterprise Development Fund (YEDF), Uwezo Fund, the labour export programme, Subsidized Youth Polytechnic Tuition Scheme (SYPT), The National Youth Service (NYS), Kazi Kwa Vijana (KKV), Youth Empowerment Centres (YECs), and the “trees for jobs” initiative with mixed successes [sic]. Some of the lessons learnt while implementing these programmes include the need for a better structured framework and implementation of a youth employment strategy, a system to collect and disseminate job opportunities, as well as urgent measures to increase accessibility and quality of technical and vocational skills training. These learning lessons need to be urgently implemented (YAA 2014: 15) (*italics our emphasis*)

Echoing these contentions, our findings demonstrate that many young people are either unaware of the existing Kenya Youth Development Policy (2019) or misinformed about how it relates to them and the opportunities it portends. At the same time, many from this demographic, have also faced challenges accessing funds availed to them through programmes such as the Youth Enterprise Development Fund (YEDF) and the Access to Government Procurement Opportunities (AGPO) initiative, because of byzantine and unnecessary bureaucracy, corruption, high registration costs or lack of information (Wohoro 2016).

The National Youth Service Community Cohorts Programme did away with much of what is documented above as the critical challenges or ‘mixed success’ of previous youth employment schemes. In many ways, because it was accessible to all and at a scale that was novel, it did not require a complicated registration process and was located in needy communities. However, despite the benefits that incurred to youth involved in the NYS programme across the two sites of our study, Kibera and Mathare, interlocutors consulted voiced critiques of the programme: in particular, that it could have engaged with youth better at the ideation stage, and this would have avoided what they saw as its weaknesses in design and implementation. Ultimately, however, as an intervention that was oriented around four main axes – the provision of gainful employment, resocialization, the fostering of a sense of responsibility and savings and training instruction for youth (NYS 2022), the Cohorts Programme was moderately successful, and was often cited by youth in Kibera as a national intervention that had more reach and impact than previous inclusion programmes. These successes and weaknesses are discussed in the following section.

# Findings

Kibera is a poor urban settlement in Nairobi, roughly four kilometres from the city centre. It is one of the oldest 'African' settlements in the city and was established in the early twentieth century as an area of residence for Nubian soldiers who had assisted the British in their imperial expansionist enterprises. For their services, these soldiers from Sudan received the "will of the crown" to live in this area from as early as 1902 (Parsons 1997).

Currently, it is constituted by a diverse population, and at the last census, count was documented as having 185, 768 persons, although it is popularly considered to have at least double this number. It is important to note that roughly 42% of this population is young people between the ages of 15 - 35 (KNBS 2020). Census data further demonstrates that this settlement has a high percentage of residents who are seeking work, the majority of whom are living in high-density areas with poor basic services. As but one example of this, almost half of residents, 45% of the population, access water through a public standpipe (KNBS 2020), and sanitation, housing, roads, education and health facilities continue to be inadequate in most of its thirteen villages.

These conditions inform a shared feeling of historical marginalization, which has pronounced ethnic inflections in this particular geography. This was most sinisterly demonstrated in events such as the post-election violence of 2007- 2008 (cf. CIPEV 2008). More recently, local youth gangs have been implicated in extortion, provision of services such as water and electricity, security, violence and political mobilizations in the area (Achuka 2021). Incidences of gender-based violence are high (Swart 2012), and, as elsewhere in the country, a considerable number of recorded instances of police killings of young people (Austin 2019).

The prevailing socio-economic context, therefore, legitimized, that Kibera was the pilot location for the National Youth Service Community Cohorts Programme when it was launched in 2013. By 2014, 1700 youth from the settlement were engaged to participate in both community clean-ups and infrastructure building. The youth received Kenyan shillings one thousand six hundred and forty-eight (KES 1648) at the end of each week. This programme lasted close to three years, between 2013- 2017, and youth perceptions of the benefits and challenges of this intervention are detailed in the next section.



# Key Results

Seven hundred and eighty six respondents participated in our quantitative survey in Kibera.<sup>1</sup> Out of this number, 51.9% were former NYS cohorts, with 49.6% being male and 54.1% female. Of these participants, 66.3% of those consulted were between the ages of 25–34 at the time of the survey in 2020, illustrating that the majority of respondents were over 18 when they signed up for the NYS programme. What’s more, the vast majority, 88%, were regular cohort members, and only 12% of those surveyed were cohort leaders.

## Employment: The Principal Motivation for Youth Participation in the NYS Programme

Of those who participated in our survey in Kibera, 94.4% stated that their principal motivation for joining this youth scheme was to get employment and income. Close to a quarter of respondents, 24.5%, added that they were also drawn by the possibility of acquiring important life and technical skills; while 17.9% were inspired to join the NYS project to contribute to the development of their community.

Equally, in the data validation forums we conducted, all forum participants confirmed that they enrolled in the project because they needed employment and income. Correspondingly, interlocutors also spoke of joining to leave “idleness,” “make friends” and to “reduce crime” (see Figure 1).

Furthermore, the vast majority of discussion group participants, likely over 56% documented by the survey results, said they worked within the programme for as long as was possible: from the beginning to its abrupt end due to “politics.”<sup>2</sup> Those who stopped midway, a minority, left primarily to pursue school or other work opportunities, or withdrew for a period due to illness, maternity leave, or, for example, problems with the person whose ID they were using.<sup>3</sup> There were also a few who used this intervention as a ‘stepping stone’ to get jobs elsewhere, or even to attain passports that would allow them to work in Saudi Arabia, for example.

The large number of young people who worked until the end of the project in Kibera, just before the election period in 2017, overwhelmingly illustrates that youth engaged would have held on to this economic opportunity should it have continued. Correspondingly, 97% of respondents conveyed that they had no other economic opportunities at the time in which they were working.

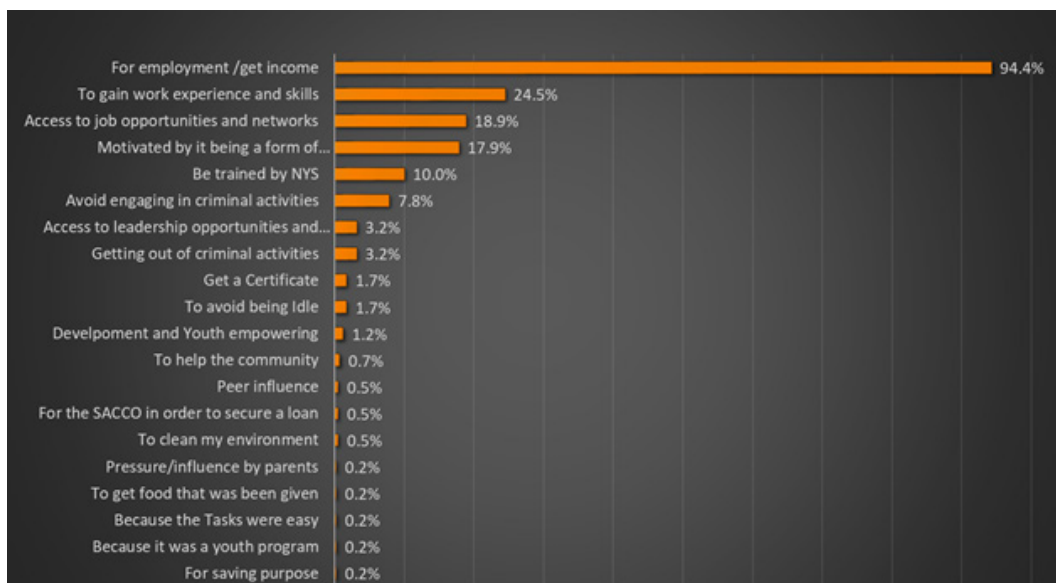
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<sup>1</sup>In 2019, CHRIPS initiated this research intervention to understand the impact of the NYS Community Cohorts Programme on youth employment, governance and crime reduction in Mathare and Kibera. For these purposes, a quantitative survey was conducted in early March 2020, while the qualitative research processes, consisting of 21 data validation exercises in Kibera, took place between September 2020 and July 2021 respectively.

<sup>2</sup>This reference to “politics” signposts the corruption charges brought against key NYS leadership between 2015- 2018.

<sup>3</sup>We noted a number of cases where people who were either younger or older than the requisite 18-35 years of age used other people’s identity documents to access cohort opportunities within this programme

**Figure 1: “Why did you enrol in the NYS Community Cohorts Programme?”**



## Opportunities for Skills Development

Though the project ended abruptly, with both training and infrastructures incomplete, a large number of respondents asserted that being enrolled in the scheme allowed them attain transferable skills that they are using in their present jobs (43.9%). Certainly, whether they used it as a stepping stone or an employment opportunity, the programme enabled cohorts to learn skills that would be translatable to other positions and contexts. During our data validation fora, roughly 30% of participants confirmed that they were using skills obtained while engaged in this youth scheme in their present livelihood engagements. It is important to note that since a large number of these participants were not working at the time of the data validation focus group discussions, they were not confident that the skills they had learned – such as masonry, painting, construction etc., – were useful to their present work situations. However, they did confirm that some of these skills were useful in their own households broadly. One interlocutor shared that “people even developed skills like opening a bank account,” which they had not had the confidence and ability to do previously, and this enabled them to expand their lives in multiple ways. Correspondingly, it is important to note that the “discipline and confidence” that 20.4% of survey respondents said they acquired as a result of the project, was also affirmed in instances of ‘opening a bank account’, and throughout the data validation exercises. The development of these virtues is a core institutional objective of this youth employment scheme.

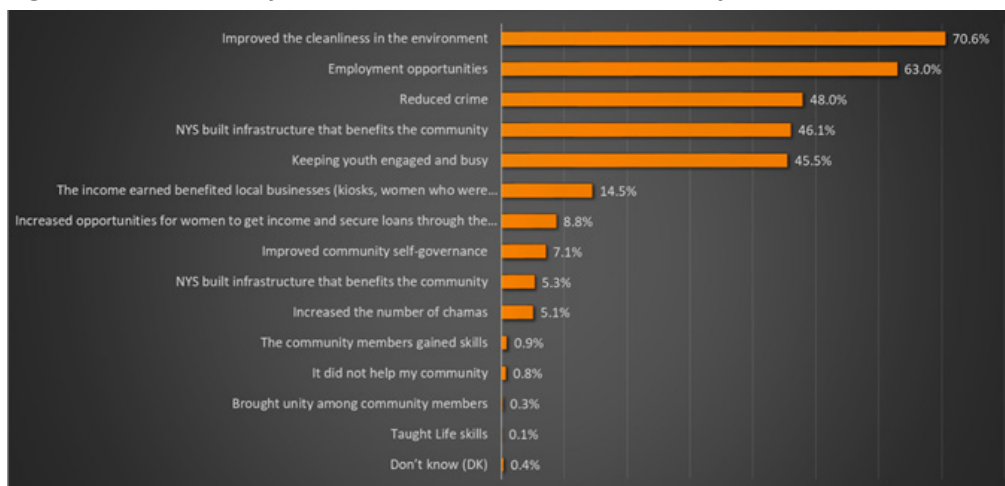
## Benefits to the Community

In terms of benefits to their community, 70.6% of Kibera respondents shared that during the period in which the NYS project was running, their environment was cleaner. In addition, 60.3% asserted that the employment opportunities were accessible and benefited their locales. Forty-eight percent said that crime reduced, 46.1% conveyed that the infrastructure built benefited the community, while 45.5% approved of the fact that youth were “kept busy.” A smaller, but notable, percentage of people highlighted the benefits accrued from the community savings groups that emerged because of widespread access to income. Loans were acquired through the NYS savings and credit cooperative organizations (SACCOs), and local business owners had increased commerce during this time.

These gains also corresponded to those seen as impacting youth. In this regard, when asked: “In what ways did the youth in this area generally benefit from the NYS project?” Respondents asserted that this demographic got livelihood opportunities (58.1%), kept engaged and busy (51.9%), started or expanded businesses (49.6%) and gained skills and work experience (32.2%). Other benefits include opportunities for community leadership (29.9%), loans (21.8%), savings and SACCOs (14.2%).

With regards to a reduction in crime, the evidence offered for this was experiential and anecdotal. However, during the data validation exercises, all interlocutors suggested that crime reduced because those who had no job prospects previously could get an income. This coupled with the reality that, as a few interlocutors shared, “you were too tired at the end of a long day of work to do anything else.” Related, 3.2% of those surveyed said that they enrolled in the programme to ‘get out of criminal activities.’ What’s more, because of the constant interaction and co-mentorship between youth from different backgrounds and areas, a unity and a familiarity was brought about which allowed as one participant humorously shared, “thieves and complainers became friends.”<sup>4</sup> Similarly, interlocutors also spoke about the intra-community unity that was enabled by NYS activities since youth from different areas would work together.

**Figure 2: “In what ways did the NYS benefit this community?”**



<sup>4</sup>Laini Saba focus group participant, September 19, 2020

## Community Leadership

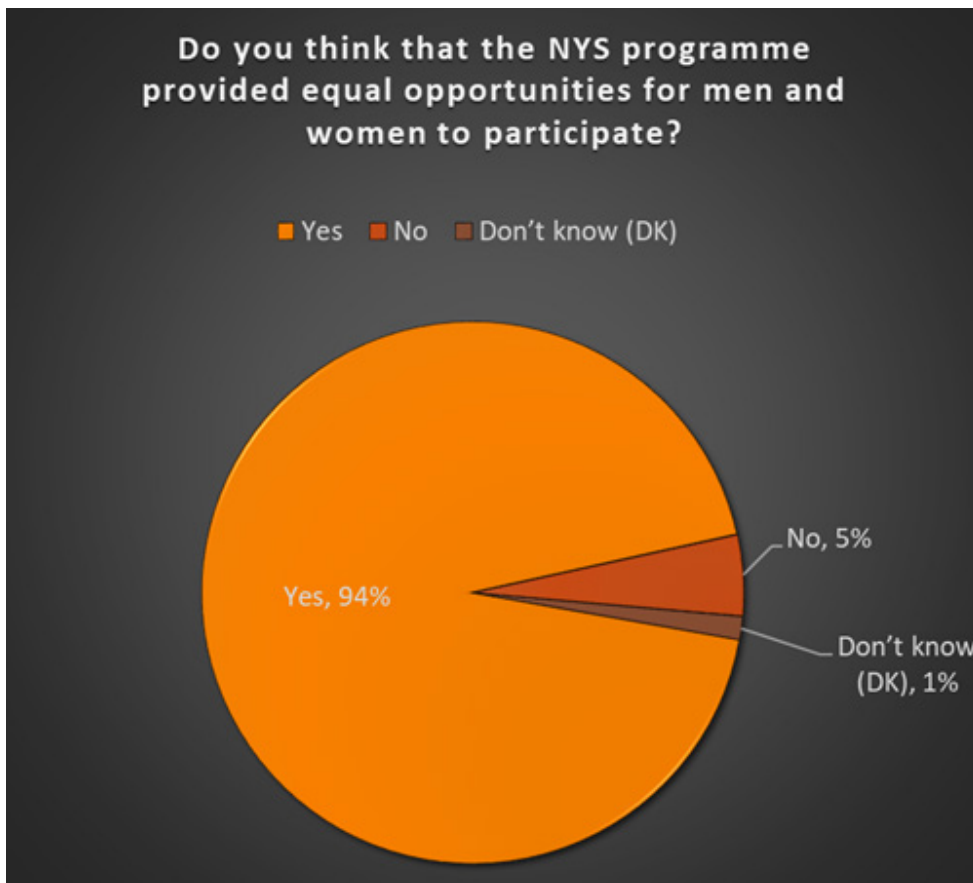
Survey data demonstrated that 71% of the respondents felt that the NYS youth empowerment programme improved involvement in community leadership and affairs. However, the validation exercises registered that this impact was uneven, and was contingent on specific village or ward dynamics. For example, data validation participants from Laini Saba and Mashimoni said there were really no opportunities for leadership in the programme, since leadership was taken by force, “kifua,” by those who already had power and influence. Leadership opportunities available in the scheme were, for example, SACCO leader or supervisor, but since there was no secret ballot to choose these positions, many cohort members felt compelled, even intimidated, to vote for persons who were friends with the local administration or were influential in other ways.

In contrast respondents from Woodley ward and Sarang’ombe, said that leaders were democratically elected, and reflected local cohort choices. These ward disparities in formal leadership roles notwithstanding, many spoke of the proliferation of community-based organisations and youth and savings groups during the time of the programme, and their role in contributing to youth involvement in diverse community affairs. Two former NYS cohort leaders who stood as candidates for the Nairobi County Assembly, and, for Member of County Assembly (MCA) positions in 2017 were used as examples to evidence that the project had supported some youth to attain prominence, skills and support to run for formal political positions. It is worth noting that those who were able to gain standing in the community were primarily those who were elected as SACCO or site leaders. From this group, both men and women were recognized as mentors, community representatives, potential community health volunteers, and were often chosen by different NGOs to represent their wards.

## Gender Equality

Ninety-four percent of Kibera survey respondents said that they were not denied any opportunities because of their sex (see Figure 3) this is 94% of females and 94% of males. This lack of gender bias was affirmed in all the data validation discussion groups, while also given more nuance. For example, while women and men were treated equally both during registration, as well as given almost identical tasks-- whether construction or cleaning-- during project activities, sometimes, ‘considerate’ discrimination did occur. For example, one male participant shared that if female cohort members could not carry some of the heavier equipment or material, the males in the specific platoon would carry the load. Related, one participant narrated how she would take her young child to work since she did not have childcare, and she did not face any discrimination or repercussions for this.

**Figure 3: “Do you think that the NYS programme provided equal opportunities for men and women to participate?”**



At the same time, participants conveyed that there was, from time to time, harsh treatment of cohorts in Kibera by senior NYS staff and cadets. Some were said to have been too authoritarian or engaging in ethnic favouritism. Furthermore, some participants felt that male cohorts were ‘disciplined’ more than female cohorts by these staff members and that leaders could sometimes use their positions to solicit bribes from those who wanted to join the empowerment programme later than the initial registration date, and to compel sexual favours from junior female employees. Participants consulted however emphasized that these events did not constitute or contribute to widespread discrimination neither did they have a significant impact on the recruitment or working conditions of NYS cohorts broadly.

# Conclusion

Our survey and qualitative research engagements contributed to the following objective: to assess the extent to which the National Youth Service (NYS) Community Cohorts Programme in Kenya has contributed to youth inclusion in economic life and governance, and the impact of that inclusion on violence in Nairobi.

The results discussed in this report illustrate the multiple individual and community benefits that were prompted by the NYS programme, even while its tenure was impacted by corruption issues at the senior management level. Consequently, our findings uphold the utility of this youth scheme, and parallel inclusion projects, as a viable means to enable opportunities for socio-economic improvement.

Earlier discussions have made clear how an overwhelming majority of survey respondents confirmed that they enrolled in the NYS programme because of the opportunity to get an income, so as to improve their socio-economic conditions. Correlated, during the data validation exercises, all respondents spoke about how working as a cohort within the scheme had changed their lives both materially and socially. They could fend for their families, buy mattresses or cows, save, pay debts and, in turn, improve their own skills and self-esteem. The ability to fend for oneself enabled many to ‘settle down’-- marry, move out on their own and even open a business. Though access to loans depended on the politics of one’s ward, both with and without, cohorts still made do with the little salary they received, and through this started businesses, savings and youth groups. These personal and collective efforts, propelled by the regular income of the large number of people included in the project, had a cascading impact in Kibera. In this regard, local businesses boosted their profits because of the increased circulation of money in the local economy.

While its impact on community governance appears to be uneven and contingent on the dynamics of each ward, ultimately, this programme catalyzed the proliferation of hundreds of savings and youth groups that, while not directly implicated in community governance, are organized in formations that can enact influence of various forms. In addition, some interlocutors described how NYS has contributed to “airing out grievances” and unifying areas and villages that had been living in oscillating enmity since the post-election violence of 2008. Therefore, through its powerful but unanticipated function as a platform for bringing community residents across the different villages to share, heal and create broader unity, we suggest that this programme has contributed to enabling more fertile ground for dialogical and democratic community processes. Although it has not led to formal leadership roles for its former cohort members.

The prevention and reduction of crime and violence was, certainly, across all data validation forums and the survey, revealed as a prime result of this inclusion programme. This is for a variety of reasons including the intentional registration as cohorts by their peers and mentors, of those who were involved in petty criminal activity. Above all, as detailed during validation discussions, the consistent income enabled youth to provide for some of their basic needs, preventing the need for them to consider (re)engaging in criminal activity, especially if they had engaged in this previously. Related, the exertion of a full day's work

of, often, manual labour, deprived young people the energy to engage in petty crime should they have had the inclination to do so after their NYS activities.

It is important to note that gender was a key variable in this project, and in both the survey and validation exercises-- from the questions asked to the participants who were selected to participate in this process, attention to the different roles and effects of this programme on men and women was foregrounded. In both our quantitative and qualitative fora, cohorts consulted confirmed that gender discrimination was not intentionally reproduced by the programme. From the recruitment process to the similar tasks that both genders were asked to do, the vast majority of interlocutors asserted that this was all “equal.” In some areas there were many more women cohorts than male cohorts. When asked why this was the case, female interlocutors shared responses that registered, for example, that “it is because women are the ones who have problems” and so they would persevere through the two week volunteer period that marked the start of the NYS activities<sup>5</sup> to make sure that they would secure eventual employment in this youth scheme.

Similarly, it was suggested that not enough young men brought themselves to volunteer, and this could account for the disproportionate number of women in some areas. Related, in Lindi ward, one participant shared that some young men would not keep up the discipline required to report to work early every day, and thus there were many more women than men registered for the scheme in this area.<sup>6</sup> However, without having access to gender desegregated numbers of cohorts at registration and at the end of the project, we are unable to generalize about either of the two suggested reasons for female cohort dominance in some sections of Kibera. What is clear, from both the survey and the validation fora, is that gender discrimination was not a central feature of the operations of the programme, and that, overwhelmingly, women and men performed the same tasks.

As is evident from the foregoing discussion, the National Youth Service Cohorts Programme had a significant impact on the economic lives of young Kibera residents and contributed to the reduction of petty crime and violence in the area. Its impact on community governance, however, remains uneven. These results notwithstanding, there are a number of policy recommendations, informed by both the quantitative and qualitative research activities, which become imperative to endorse. Five core recommendations are:

## Policy Recommendations

- 1) **Youth involvement in the conceptualization of the project:** Youth need to be involved in the ideation stage of future inclusion projects, to make sure that intended processes and outcomes benefit them fully. Specifically, this youth empowerment project was created without their involvement, even as it targeted them. Participants consulted identify their absence in the design stage as contributing to some of what they saw as core weaknesses of the scheme, including the choice of training and infrastructure building activities, which were not always relevant. For example,

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<sup>5</sup>Cohorts would volunteer for two weeks after registering for the project to, ostensibly, show their commitment for the NYS scheme. After completion of the volunteer period, their employment in the project would be confirmed.

<sup>6</sup>Lindi focus group participant, September 18, 2020

fishponds were not well suited to Kibera where there is insufficient access to clean water, and SACCOs were not widely popular since young people could create their own forums for saving.

- 2) **Diversity and professionalisation of activities:** In our data validation fora, former cohort members decried the overwhelming focus on entrepreneurship and savings training in the programme, since not all youth have the ability or desire to be entrepreneurs. Interlocutors suggested that other training areas can be considered in consultation with them should this programme return or be replaced, and that certificates of completion can be part of these activities since this professional recognition can help youth in their future job search endeavours.
- 3) **Higher wages and regular payments:** While appreciated and impactful, NYS wages were below the statutory minimum wage, and often delayed. All cohort members consulted suggested that both an increase in and the regularity of wages in future inclusion programmes would have even more resounding financial impact, on both a personal and community level, than that seen during the implementation of the programme between 2014 – 2017.
- 4) **Inclusive of all ages and abilities:** Since economic uncertainty affects everyone, especially in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic, interlocutors consulted recommended that while youth should be a priority, any intervention should include all ages since a large cross-section of those above 35 are also struggling to improve their socio-economic conditions. In addition, there was the recognition that people with disabilities were and are not adequately incorporated in NYS youth empowerment activities, and this was identified as important to remedy in future programmes, to ensure substantive inclusion of all community members.
- 5) **Democratic leadership and forums for accountability:** Frequent forums to ensure accountability of all leadership was suggested to guarantee that programme leaders are elected in a democratic and transparent manner, and are, thus accountable. In addition, since this programme was suspended abruptly, forums for accountability were suggested to make sure all members could air grievances, have protection as whistleblowers should they choose to become one, and, above all, ensure that programme activities could continue even while concerns could be dealt with in an ongoing manner.



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